

TRANSCRIPT

Dan Pink on selling: Why we're all doing it

Podcast interview with Dan Pink, best-selling author of "To Sell is Human," and Janelle Kozyra, blogger for Post University

Janelle: Greetings, everyone. I'm Janelle Kozyra, blogger for Post University. Today I have with me an exciting guest, Dan Pink, whom many at Post University are big fans of. So welcome to the podcast, Dan. It's great to have you with us.

Dan: Hey, Janelle. It's great to be here.

Janelle: So Dan is the author of five books, including some long-time New York Times best-sellers, "A Whole New Mind" and "Drive." And his latest book is "To Sell Is Human," which is now also a New York Times best seller, Wall Street Journal business best seller, and a Washington Post non-fiction best seller.

"To Sell Is Human" looks at the art and science of sales, and turns many of our long-held ideas about sales on their heads. And one of the first ones, Dan, that you put forth in your book is you cite that one in nine American workers are in sales. That is, selling some product or service, whatever it may be, sort of our traditional view of what someone does when they're in sales. But then you say that the other eight are in sales as well. So can you explain what you mean by that?

Dan: Sure. What I found through some research is that those as you're saying, Janelle, those other eight in nine, they're not selling Winnebagos. They're not selling aircraft parts. They're not selling computer services. But they're selling a different thing. What they're doing is persuading, influencing, convincing, and cajoling other people to make an exchange.

I'm a boss trying to get my employees to do different things or do things in a different way. I'm an employee trying to get my boss to free up resources. I'm on a job and I'm trying to get my teammate or someone to join my team rather than another team.

And so what we're doing is entering transactions in a way. I'm giving something up in exchange for what you're giving up. But it's sales with a twist in that no money is changing hands. The cash register is not ringing. And the transaction is not denominated in dollars. It's denominated in time. It's denominated in attention or effort or attitude.

And what we found is that people are spending about 40 percent of their time on the job doing this thing that I call non-sale sells. Forty percent of their time persuading, influencing, convincing in this way that's very much like sales, except it's not about an exchange of money. It's about an exchange of another type of resources.

Janelle: You talk about three myths in your book, Dan, and one of them is some people are natural-born salespeople. Why is this a myth?

Dan: Well, I mean, we have this notion that some of those people are good at this. And I just think that's wrong on a number of different levels. That sales is a skill. Persuading, influencing other people is a skill. Now I think there might be some differences in innate ability, but I don't think anybody comes out of the womb as, I don't think anybody is born, out of the womb as a salesperson anymore than we think people come out of the womb as a born violinist, or a born placekicker, or a born software writer. I mean, you have to learn how to do stuff. It's about skill. It's about practice. So, I think that's one thing.

The second thing is that some really interesting new research shows that this idea that you have to be a super extrovert in order to be in sales is just flatly wrong. What this research from the University of Pennsylvania shows, is that the best salespeople actually are not, surprisingly, strong introverts.

Strong introverts are not very good at this. They don't strike up conversations. They sometimes have difficulty asserting themselves. Makes perfect sense. But what I think is more interesting is that strong extroverts aren't much better. Strong extroverts tend to be pretty terrible salespeople because they talk too much, they listen too little. They're too pushy.

And the people who are very best at this are people who are ambiverts, which is a term from the literature since the 1920s that describes people who are somewhat introverted and somewhat extroverted, kind of in the middle. And most of us are actually in that modulated middle. So most of us are ambiverts, which means that most of us can do this reasonably well if we have the right training and practice, practice, practice.

Janelle: You interviewed some car dealers in your book and you covered how buyers are now more knowledgeable of products than ever before, and in fact, buyers have just as much information, and maybe even perhaps more information, than sellers. Can you describe what's going on there?

Dan: Sure. This is a huge issue. A lot of what we know about sales comes from a world of information asymmetry, where the seller always has more information than the buyer. This is totally true with cars. And this is a big reason why a lot of us think that sales is slippery, duplicitous, slimy, dishonest, because most of us are experienced on the other end of sales, have been in a world where we were at a huge information disadvantage over the seller. Sellers knew a heck of a lot more than we could.

But that information asymmetry, that pretty much defines the sales relationship, is ending. I mean, we don't live in a world of information asymmetry so much anymore. And that completely changes the game of sales.

And part of our great example of that, so 20 years ago I walk into a car dealer, the car dealer's going to know a lot more about cars, a lot more about—let's say at the Chevy dealer, a lot more about Chevy, a lot more about Chevy Malibus than I ever will. All right? This is why I have the principle of buyer beware.

If I go into a dealer and the dealer has a huge information advantage over me, I'm going to be pretty wary. And the dealer could rip me off in some way. But that's not our world. You go into a car dealer today, you can go in knowing the factory invoice price of the car. You could go in

knowing what ever dealer in the area is charging for the car. You could go in having visited online forums of Chevy Malibu owners and knowing the ins and outs of the car. You could arguably know about the car, more about Chevy, more about Chevy Malibus, than that car dealer.

This is a big deal. So we move from a world, the old world was buyers have not much information, not many choices, and no way to talk back. Now you've got a world where buyers have lots information, lots of choices, and all kinds of ways to talk back. And that's a world of seller beware. And so the sellers are more on notice. And selling in a world of seller beware is qualitatively different than selling in a world of buyer beware.

Janelle: So what if the Internet never happened? What if we didn't have social media? What if the information age was not here? Do you think sales would be changing the way it is now?

Dan: No. I can elaborate on that.

Janelle: Sure.

Dan: I actually think that, I actually think that the catalytic force is the erosion of information asymmetry. That is, I think, in terms of the actual nature of sales, most of sales was rooted in this information imbalance. And when the information imbalance goes away, that information imbalance going away was largely the result of the Internet and social media and other kinds of technology. Without the intervening effect of those technologies, I think we'd still be in a world of information asymmetry.

Janelle: So let's talk about what this information equality means for us as sellers. And in your book you talk about the new ABC's of selling. It's about attunement, buoyancy, and clarity, you argue. So can you talk about each of those?

Dan: Sure. So we're in this world of seller beware. We're in this world that doesn't have this asymmetric information relationship. That forces more sellers to the high road. And so if you look at the social science, how do you sell well effectively in a world of seller beware, whether you're selling a product, whether you're selling a service, whether you are selling yourself, whether you're selling your idea.

And social science gives us three hints about these three foundation qualities. The new ABCs. A, attunement, B, buoyancy, C, clarity. Attunement is perspective-taking. Can you get out of the anchor of your own perspective and take someone else's perspective? That's usually important. And there's some really interesting science showing ways to do that better.

Buoyancy. One salesman that I talked to described sales as, every day you take an ocean of rejection, an ocean of rejection. And so buoyancy is how you stay afloat on that ocean of rejection. And once again the science has some clues about what do we do before an encounter, what do we do during an encounter, what do we do after an encounter?

And then finally, clarity. As you were talking about before, in the old days, having access to information gave you an advantage because not everybody had access to information. So if you were one of the privileged few who had the keys to the kingdom, you had a big advantage.

But now, access to information is no longer a sort of comparative advantage. The source of comparative advantage is being able to make sense of the wealth of information, curate information, distill information, detect meaningful patterns in that information. So that's what the job of clarity is.

The other aspects of clarity, which I think is really interesting, is the move in clarity from problem solving as a skill, to problem finding. Today if your customer or prospect knows precisely what its problem is, they can probably find the answer without you. Where you're more valuable is that they don't know what their problem is or they're wrong about their problem.

So where you can provide some value is by identifying problems that they don't realize they have by surfacing latent problems or by looking down the road and saying you're not facing this right now but here is a problem you're going to confront.

Janelle: And that takes us to three key abilities that you cover that we need to get better at in order to improve our approach to sales. Can you talk about those three? And if you can, give us some practical tips for how we can get better at those three key abilities.

Dan: Sure thing. So they are to pitch, to improvise, and to serve. To pitch and to improvise and to serve. Let's talk about pitching. We're pitching all the time. But I think one of the big lessons for all of us, including your listeners, is, what's the purpose of a pitch in the first place? What's the purpose of the pitch?

And there's some fascinating research. My view of this is that the purpose of the pitch is not to convert, all right? It's not to convert somebody. A pitch is really an invitation. It's an invitation to collaborate. It's an invitation to engage. We have to think about our pitches that way. That when I'm trying to convert in that moment, we're trying to invite people in. So I think going into a pitch with that in mind is hugely important.

The second is that the social science actually gives us some new ways to pitch. And I think one of my favorites is pitching the question. What research at Ohio State shows pretty clearly is that when the facts are on your side, pitching with questions is very effective. When the facts are not on your side, you do it at your peril.

But when the facts are on your side, when the facts are very clearly on your side, pitching with questions is effective. And the reason for that is that questions by their very nature elicit an active response. They elicit an active response. And so in asking a question, even if it's to yourself, even if it's to somebody else, they have to actually kind of sort of respond, even if it's not explicitly. The wheels start turning a little bit.

And so if I ask a question and you start reviewing the facts and the facts are pretty solid on my side, you arguably can come up with your own reasons for agreeing with me. And people have their own reasons for doing something. They believe them more deeply, adhere to them more strongly. So there's a pretty good argument when the facts are on your side, pitching with questions rather than statements.

There is really great research out of Carnegie Mellon on an email subject line. Every email subject line, every email's a pitch. Pay attention to me. Engage with me. And what this research out of Carnegie Mellon shows is that the best email subject line will appeal either to utility or curiosity.

They announced that this is going to be directly relevant to your work. That's utility. Or they create some level of uncertainty and make people curious. So if you give me, say, an assignment. You're my boss and you say, "We've got to find a place for office parties." I'm going to be more likely to get my email to you opened if I say, "three options for office parties," rather than something mushier like "follow-up," or "some ideas," or that kind of thing.

And then curiosity is certain people will open the email. In the 2012 election campaign, the most opened email that Barack Obama, the Obama campaign, sent out, was the sender was Barack Obama, and the subject line was "Hey." H-E-Y. Wow. The president's saying hey. I wonder what that's about. And it got opened and it was a huge source in contributions. So that's the pitch.

Improvise. There are three lessons that improvisational actors of improvisational theater learn that I think are completely relevant to the world of selling, influence, persuasion, etc. One of them is to hear offers.

So a lot of times, so if you and I are two improv actors on stage, every word that comes out of your mouth is an offer to me. I have to hear an offer in that. Every word that comes out of my mouth is an offer to you. This ability to train our ears to hear offers, even within what looks like resistance or rejection or objection, is really powerful.

Another lesson of improvisational theater is to say, "yes," and rather than, "yes, but," because that ends up being more constructive than deconstructive. And then finally the principle of making your partner look good. There's a lot to be said for that. In improvisational theater, you and I are on stage. My job is to make you look good. Your job is to make me look good. And having that approach when we sell, influence, persuade is really powerful.

And then finally is a serve. Well, a few years ago, a few decades ago, there was a guy named Robert Greenleaf who wrote about what he called "servant leadership," the idea that leaders serve first and lead second. Very powerful idea. Radical at the time. It's come to be widely accepted over the years. And I think we're at a point now where we're in midst of something or on the brink of something that might be called "servant selling," where the most effective way to do this is to serve first and sell next.

And so those three tactical kinds of abilities, to pitch, and to improvise, and to serve, can sit on the foundation of these three qualities and give us a more specific, tactical way to be effective.

Janelle: And Dan, what do you think is the best news that your book reveals?

Dan: Best news for whom? For all of us? Anybody?

Janelle: Best news for all of us. For all of us, yep.

Dan: I think the best news is that it sort of goes to one of your earlier questions, which is that selling isn't this kind of inhuman activity. It isn't something that only a blessed few are inherently good at. It isn't something that in order to do well you have to be a sleaze bag. The actually good news is that selling something is a natural part of who we are and the way to do it better today is to do it more like a human being.

Janelle: So your book has a lot research, a lot of stories, and a lot of tips for being better at selling and persuading people. So if someone were to embrace the philosophies and advice in your book, and put them into play in their life, what sort of salesperson do you envision that person becoming?

Dan: I think that person, I think not even a salesperson but actually a human being who is trying to serve others. A human being who listens well. A human being who asks good questions. A human being who can find hidden problems that solving of which will make people's lives better. A human being who is more in tune with other people's perspective. And a human being who can deal with the endless rejections in sales. So someone who I think is going to be more effective, again going back to my earlier point, is going to be more effective because they're doing something in a more human and a more humane way.

Janelle: Great. Thanks, Dan, thanks for taking time out with us. We really appreciate it. Lots of good insights here.

Dan: Great. Thanks, Janelle. Appreciate it.

Janelle: Thanks. And for folks out there, if what you heard today was interesting to you, feel free to pick up Dan's new book, "To Sell Is Human." Thanks, Dan.

Dan: Thank you.

Janelle: Thank you. Bye.